Interview with Jack Briggs, Joan Carroll Briggs, and Dan Briggs,
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Interviewed at Briggs Funeral Service in Denton, North Carolina by Sarah Bryan for Folklife of the Funeral Services Profession

Jack Briggs: Well, I am a firm believer in the healing process of a funeral. I'm a firm believer that viewing the deceased, after they've been properly prepared and dressed, is healing. I hear people say, "Well, I don't want to look at So-and-So. I want to remember them as they were." Well, what we have to come to accept is they are not as they were. They were alive. They're now dead. And everybody has to deal with that in their own way. That's the thing that concerns me about cremation when it's used as a direct disposal. Because I feel like people don't go through the grief process, and down the road they may come back to have problems. So I'm a firm believer in what we do. And how often we hear people say, after they come in, and after they view for the first time, how much relief they have, and what a sense comes over them of acceptance, and how glad they are that they did that. We just had somebody recently said that.

Joan Carroll Briggs: Several. Somebody found peace, is what they told me. She said they found peace after viewing her son.

JB: Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah. It was a tragic death. But we have been, I have been, so fortunate to start out here the way I started out, and to have the opportunities that we've had to grow our business, expand our business. We bought, in 1973, we bought a small funeral home down in Candor, Montgomery County, that was in third generation, and the third generation, grandson, was not cut out to be a funeral director any way whatsoever. It was forced on him, and his grandfather gave him the business, sent him to—pulled him out of State College[1], sent him to mortuary school; he came back, bought him a new hearse, family car, gave him the business, the building, et cetera. He stayed there four years and did more damage than his grandfather had done good in 50 years. And that taught me to never force a child, if it wasn't what they wanted to do. And we have a daughter who (laughs) has never wanted anything to do with it. So. But that business was started as a furniture store, selling coffins, providing services. And then we bought Davidson in '89, furniture store. We bought—what?

Daniel Briggs: Carter. In Rockingham, in Ellerbe, in 1998. And I don't know how it started.

[1] North Carolina State University in Raleigh

JB: No, it was not an outgrowth of a furniture store. Sedberry[2] had started that business about 1948.

DB: And then bought Piedmont Funeral Home in 2001.

JB: Which was a furniture store. So furniture is deep in our background.

DB: And as he said earlier, we think we're the last funeral home/furniture store combination left in the state.

SB: That's amazing, yeah. I've certainly never heard of another one currently. What are your memories of the—

JCB: I was just going to say, I remember we met some folks at the national convention, and he said his family started a furniture store and then—and I don't remember which state they were from—and then turned it into a funeral home. And we said we didn't know if there were any left around or not. And he was still running both.

JB: Well, in the Midwest most all the funeral homes started as furniture stores, just like in the South.

DB: And of course we don't do a lot of business at our furniture store anymore, but we are a GE dealer, so we do a little bit of appliances.

[00:05:03] SB: I've heard that the funeral stores in those days that were also funeral homes, that they often sold phonographs too. Have you encountered that, do you remember selling phonographs or phonograph records?

JB: No.

SB: Because you would have been just at the cusp between when 78s turned to 33s, right?

JB: Right.

DB: We used to sell televisions. Did you ever sell radios?

JB: Yeah, I can remember when I first started working here we had radios.

DB: Floor models?

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[2] Don Sedberry of Rockingham, in Richmond County, NC

JB: I don't remember floor models.

JCB: I remember selling daybeds and linoleum.

DB: Yeah. Yeah. You used to talk about wood heaters.

JB: Oh yeah, we sold wood heaters. We had a big wood heater market, back in '73 and the oil embargo. I bet that fall of the year we sold 50 wood heaters, as fast as we could get them in. We had a waiting list, people wanting to buy them.

DB: There probably aren't many small, independent furniture stores around, period, simply because most of the manufacturers have such a high minimum. They won't wholesale to people. And that's affected us, with— Even the local manufacturers won't sell to us anymore.

SB: Yeah, that's so unusual in itself.

JB: And I had, at one time, in the '90s, concerns about these national corporations that were buying up funeral homes, and paying ridiculous prices for them, thinking that—knowing what had happened in the retail furniture industry, if the same thing could be happening in the funeral, if enough of these firms were bought by these large corporations, they could squeeze the manufacturers not to sell us. As it turned out, they were not as successful. Some of them went into bankruptcy. They paid too much for firms, and they, in the larger towns, they're more successful than they are in the rural areas because, just like the Piedmont firm that we own today, they—Piedmont, the Timberlakes sold Piedmont to Vogler's in Winston. At one point in time Vogler's was the largest funeral home in North Carolina.

DB: And the oldest, right?

JB: And one of the oldest. And you know, known for high standards, et cetera. And the Timberlakes sold Piedmont about '82 to them, and then about 1990 Vogler's sold out to one of these corporations. We bought Davidson in '89, so just as we bought Davidson, Piedmont all of a sudden becomes part of a big conglomerate. And our market share starts climbing rapidly. Theirs starts declining. They have a lot of labor turnover, their manager comes to us, wants a job, we hire him—he's still with us today. He brought a lot of business with him, simply because, as he said to us, "I can't practice funeral service the way I want to practice funeral service." And I'm not saying there aren't some good, competent funeral directors that work for some of these larger corporations, but it's a different mentality from what we can do, and what we do do. And generally the first thing they did when they bought a place and paid exorbitant prices for it, they would raise their service charge. And they would start losing market

share, so they would raise their service charge more to offset the loss of revenue all of a sudden.

SB: What do you feel does make a good funeral director? I'd love to know what all of you feel about that. What are the qualities that are best in this field?

JB: Meeting people. Being willing to listen to people. Striving to make them feel comfortable.

[00:10:00] Listening to them. Just listening, get them to talk when they come in and set down.

DB: Well, it's got to be a compassionate—compassionate care. And I think a lot of that's just through experience. I don't know that there's a way to teach it or to—other than repetition. But being able to— Each family's different, coming from different circumstances, dealing with a death that could have happened in different ways. You know, I've heard him say you know what to tell the family that comes in and their mother or grandmother that's 95 years old has died.

JB: We know how to deal with that.

DB: But that's a little different than the 12-year-old that you were talking about, or infants.

JB: A 20-year-old, a suicide.

DB: Tragic incidents. But that's what I try to communicate with some of our other directors, is just trying to put yourself in the position that that family's in, and how they're viewing things, and really where they are emotionally.

SB: And they can feel that—I mean, that's something that I would think the families would really be able to sense when it's real.

DB: Right. And we're fortunate that we've served generations of families, and have built that relationship, which makes it easier for us, and hopefully makes it easier for them, to be with a familiar face in all the chaos that they're dealing with at that moment. We can (?).

JB: And that's been so difficult for me in the past year that I haven't been able to be there for families that I've served for years, and when there's a death, that I've not been able to— And I've tried to, when I could, when I was able, at least come down here and speak to somebody or go to Lexington and speak to somebody. Just to let them know that I'm thinking about them.

SB: Maintaining the connection.

JB: Yeah. Yeah. But that's been real difficult for me, because I've been one of those people that, if we had four funerals that day I wanted to be on every one of them. I can't do that now, with my foot.

DB: You'll be able to again.

JCB: I think one thing about the funeral directing is I think you meet a family, or even a new one or people you know, when they're having one of the largest crises of their life. And anything you can do to make it easier, and more helpfulness— And as a mother, I've put myself in their place, and that kind of thing. So I think one thing, it's rewarding to feel like you've helped somebody.

SB: And when somebody's having that degree of crisis, really everything is a help. All the—

JCB: The little details, and the large ones too. But like Dan says, you need to listen. Let them decide what they want, and encourage them in the right direction, sometimes they need directions.

DB: But that is someone that you are really able to help, that's going through a difficult—not that all deaths aren't difficult—but a really difficult situation. You build that special bond with that person that's—

JCB: Yes, you do.

DB: —probably pretty unusual, for most professions, that connection that you make with someone, that may last for many, many years.

JB: We all have, and we have staff that has certain families that ask for that particular staff, because they've built that rapport over the years.

DB: I'm finding now that people that I've—I mean, he's done it for years—but people that I've, working with that next generation, that I've handled their mother, their mother's service, or—several generations. I guess that means I'm getting a little age on me too. We're fortunate, really, at all of our locations, that we've had very little turnover over the years.

[00:15:02] Most of the people in Lexington that I started with 27 years ago are still there. I'm not necessarily the young guy there anymore. We're fortunate, and that's contributed a lot to our success.

JB: And we're fortunate to have the opportunity to grow our business, and the opportunities to acquire some of these business were—we were chosen because they wanted their business to be carried on— Like Davidson: these two brothers who could fight among themselves, jealous of each other, but then would come together like that. They were in their 70s, and one of them had a heart attack, and the question out there was, "Well, what's going to happen to the Kirkmans' business?"[3] 'Cause neither one of them had children interested in carrying on. And Victor had a heart attack, and I wrote each of them a letter—same letter, mailed it separately to each of them, said the same thing—that, you know, "If you all ever have an interest in selling your business, I'd like the opportunity to talk to you. I'm not going to call you, I'm not going to bombard you. If you choose to ignore this letter, we're friends," et cetera. Of course, they'd known me and my family all my life. I mean, most of their lives. And two or three weeks, maybe a month, after that letter, I get a call from their accountant, who said, "I've been authorized to discuss the sale of Davidson Funeral Home with you, and I will tell you up front, that all things being equal, their desire is that you get the business." And I thought, "Well, that's not dealing, from their standpoint, from a hand of strength, necessarily," but that's how they felt. And it was very important to them, because they saw what had happened to the Piedmont business that went to one of those, and the same thing when we bought the Carter in Rockingham and Ellerbe. I hadn't spoken to Mr. Carter probably in five years, and I came in one day and they said, "Elridge Carter[4] wants you to call him." And I called him, and he said, "I'd like to sit down and talk to you. My health's failing, and I need to do something with my business, and I want to do it while I can make the decision." And I met with him, and we went from there. But here again, he told me, he said, "I'll close it before I'll sell it to one of those chains." So that trust factor enabled us to grown our business, and we're so fortunate to start from this one small location the way I started, and today serve over 900 families.

DB: Almost 1,000.

SB: So the trust in the community, and the reputation for integrity, it sounds like it's as much a part of your business dealings with other firms and other people in the field as it is with the families you serve.

JB: Right. Right. And you know, we've been very active in the communities. Joan's served on every board there is in the county.

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[3] A. Victor Kirkman and R. O. Kirkman, Jr., proprietors of Davidson Funeral Home in Lexington, North Carolina, from 1948 (when the business passed to them from their father) to 1989 (when it was bought by the Briggs family).

[4] Eldridge and Mary Carter bought Davidson Funeral Home in Rockingham from Don and Ruby Sedberry.

DB: Between the three of us we've probably. (Laughs)

JB: Right. I was on the Davidson County Board of Education for 20 years, elected five times, led the ticket each time I ran, served as chairman 12 years, and while I was— Joan stayed home and answered the phone calls, the complaints from the parents, while I was gone.

JCB: That's real fun.

SB: And then you were on the council too?

JCB: No. I got all the phone calls, because he wasn't home.

JB: Dan was appointed by the governor to the social services board in the county, and then he was appointed by Governor Perdue to the Alcoholic Beverage Control as one of the three commissioners. And he stayed on that board until—

[00:20:02] DB: Until we had a new governor. (Laughs) That was interesting. And I did a term on the Lexington City School Board as well. Which was an appointed board, one of the few.

JB: Not an elected board. The county board is, the county— We have three school systems in Davidson County. Thomasville has their own school system, Lexington has their own system, and the county, which comprises 70-some percent of the population. When I went on the board it was about 15, 16,000 students. I guess it's up to about 20 today. I've been off since '96.

DB: Twenty years.

JB: Yeah.

SB: Has there been a lot of immigration to Davidson County, people coming from Latin America, Asia?

DB: The Lexington city system is very diverse, so there's been a lot of growth in Davidson County, in the northern end—population-wise the northern end of the county has grown tremendously, as Winston's grown from that direction, High Point's grown from that direction. But as far as immigration, really, I'd say in the cities, in Lexington they have a pretty diverse school system.

SB: Does that affect your work here, and in Lexington?

DB: Well, as you know, funeral homes are still some of the most segregated (laughs) businesses, unfortunately. There are African American firms in Lexington and Thomasville, older firms, you know, that do the majority of the African American business. We do—there's a fairly large group of Cambodian families in Lexington, and we serve them out of Piedmont Funeral Home. Most of that group goes there. And of course there's a fairly large Hispanic population in Lexington as well, and they come to Davison Funeral Home. And Montgomery County has a large Hispanic, Latino, community, and we do serve that group there, out of the Candor location.

JB: Although we have seen a decline in that business, which leads me to think that maybe when the economy got tough, some of them left, and most of the ones—because they're younger people, they're not at the high death rate yet—most of the ones were from violent deaths. Automobile accidents, things of that nature. However, we have started burying some of them locally, as opposed to shipping them back to Mexico.

DB: That's, I think that's interesting. Particularly in Montgomery County they're seeing more of those that chose to be buried there. Whereas—and in Lexington we're beginning to, but ten years ago, most of the Latino deaths that we had were sent back to somewhere.

SB: So that really shows that this is home now.

DB: Right. Right. I'm saying that they're becoming established in the community. And certainly we try to serve everyone. But it's—

JB: And when I bought Candor in '73, that firm had historically done both the African American and the white, and about four years before I bought the business, a black firm had opened up there, and they were beginning to really make inroads, and I know several times we would get a call, go pick the body up, and no sooner get back than they would come—they'd contacted the family, we know, and we haven't had a—

DB: And I think historically, Piedmont Funeral in Lexington did a lot of the African American business as well.

JB: Yeah, they did a lot.

DB: Until a, you know, firm opened up that primarily served African Americans.

SB: That's interesting, I hadn't realized that that ever happened. I mean early on. I know it does now.

DB: This would have been— What was the first African American firm in Lexington? Was that Morrison-Studevant?

JB: No, it was Crump. Ideal.

DB: Okay. That's before my time. When would they have opened?

JB: I don't know, probably '50s.

[00:25:00] But we'd love to serve more of that population at Lexington.

DB: And you wonder, certainly as we've become more and more diverse, that that's going to be hopefully less and less of an issue, to have separate firms. We'd certainly prefer it not be that way.

SB: What about accommodating different spiritual practices, and different funeral traditions, things like that?

DB: Yeah, predominantly, of course, most are Christian burials. We do, some of the Cambodian population that we serve at Piedmont, the monks come in and do a Buddhist ceremony and we take the cross down that's in the chapel. And our crematory's located at that location, so I think that's why most of those services are there, because they process from the chapel—that's part of their ceremony, is actually to go down to the crematory itself, and help place the container into the crematory. And that's the end of their service. So it's interesting to see.

JB: Interesting for us.

DB: Yeah, for us, when we're not as familiar with that. And of course, every religion has different burial customs. There's not much of a Jewish population at all in Davidson County. Forsyth County, I think.

JB: Mm-hmm.

DB: And I don't know which firm, or if all the firms do.

JB: High Point has always had a Jewish population. Sechrest used to do it.

DB: They have different customs, and I know some of our guys worked for—the funeral home they worked for in Atlanta was a Jewish funeral home, so they kind of familiarized themselves early with their services. We've done very little Islamic services. There's an Islamic cemetery in Greensboro, and they have a— Most of their customs are very similar to the Orthodox Jewish in that the burial is done as quickly after death as possibly, and normally wrapped in a shroud. Anyway, different.

SB: And is that—does that make your work simpler or more difficult when it's a shroud burial, but it's also within 24 hours?

DB: Generally it's not as much of a concern, the time factor, for us, as it would be for the cemetery. We find that with most services, is trying to—fitting into their schedule, and getting the grave opened, and different things.

JB: You know, one of the customs that, when I first started here, you never thought about asking to have permission to embalm your mama. It was just assumed. I can only remember in the early years one lady who, when we got to the house, the husband said, "She didn't want anything done to her," meaning she didn't want to be embalmed. And that was before I was licensed, but we had him come on in and pick up a casket, and we placed her—bathed her and dressed her, and carried her back home that afternoon, and had the funeral the next day. But other than that, you assumed that it's tradition.

DB: Of course now we don't assume anything.

JB: You ask. And we have concerns, sometimes, about donor services. Everybody wants to do anything they can to help advance life for somebody, and if it's somebody that's on a heart-lung machine and they can keep them alive where they can harvest organs that are beneficial, but what we find sometimes is somebody that's been dead and they maybe have put on their driver's license that they're a donor, and maybe the family didn't even know that they were a donor, and yet the spouse doesn't want them to be. And this pull as to who has the legal right in that instance.

[00:30:00] Sometimes we feel that donor services were not completely upfront with families about how long it's going to take and what they're going to do. And when we get the body back they've harvested more than the family is led to believe.

DB: Well, there's a difference between true donation—you know—

JCB: Like organs, and skin, tissue, bone, and things like that. They harvest all of that.

SB: So in each case do they take all of those specific organs?

DB: It just depends on each individual.

SB: Somebody's health and age.

DB: Yeah.

JCB: And I think I remember some family saying they had talked about eye and tissue, and they thought that was tissue around the eye. They also took skin. I guess for burn victims.

DB: Well, again, if it can be used, that's great.

JCB: Yes, but they were not aware. (?)

DB: But back to the different denominations, I'm fascinated by a lot of that. We have done a few Green Orthodox services, which isn't something you see in rural Davidson County very often.

JCB: I was thinking about the one we did in Troy, that Greek Orthodox priest, because the one that was dead was the priest.

JB: It was Eastern Orthodox, it wasn't Greek. Eastern Orthodox. At least I think. I don't know the difference.

DB: There's a difference.

JB: Okay.

SB: And that was in Troy?

JCB: That was in Troy.

DB: And there was a family that (?) started out in the church with, and the minister came out to speak to the mother of the deceased, and the deceased had been a rather wild individual, to put it mildly. And she said, "Preacher, preach him in. Preach him in, preacher." Pitiful. That's her way of having some hope.

SB: One thing I'd like to ask you about also is the Vietnam era, and how that changed your work. Now, this was before you were in funeral services, right?

JCB: Yes.

DB: They got married in '70.

JCB: (?) a local person who was in the Vietnam War who was killed, and that was a real—

JB: That was about '72, I believe.

DB: That was late in the war.

JB: Uh-huh. And he was injured, and his father had the political clout that he got to Vietnam before the boy died. Yeah. And had a full military funeral. We also had, Davidson handled, a Navy Seal three or four years ago.

DB: No, it's been longer than that.

JB: Has it been longer than that?

DB: Yeah. It's been almost ten years ago. Killed in Afghanistan. That we took to Arlington. Only time I've done that. One of the interesting—not about the Vietnam War, but you buried a—they found the remains of someone in the Pacific from World War II. When was that, 10 or 15 years ago? At the most. Maybe more like 10 or 12 years ago.

JB: It was during the (Haig?) era.

DB: Anyway, and they were finally able to identify the remains and brought them back in a casket, and he helped with the service.

JB: Yeah. Had a full military funeral. Very interesting. Had a lot of press here for it. Very interesting.

DB: The other interesting one was—and this would have been 15 years ago? Somewhere around 2000 probably. There was a retired general, three-star general from Lexington, that died in the late '60s, World War II-era. In fact if you watch or read *Band of Brothers*, he was the commanding officer for the 506th Regiment, Robert Sink. They portray him in the miniseries.

[00:35:00] He was Colonel then. The called it the Five-O-Sink. But anyway, his family's from Lexington. When he died, in the late '60s, his second wife did not want him buried in Arlington with his first wife, so she buried him in the family plot in the Lexington City Cemetery. Well, fast-forward thirty-plus years. She died, the children had him exhumed, and sent to Arlington, where he was—

JCB: Knowing that's what he would have wanted.

DB: So I went out there for the, when they exhumed him, and I (?) took the vault and everything too. Didn't open the vault, but took it to Arlington.

SB: Is that something that causes a lot of problems, you know, first and second families?

JB: We always see that.

SB: Wives and children, husbands and children?

DB: We see more and more dysfunction every day. We had a fight in the funeral home, full-blown. The room erupted. And we called the police to break it up. It was so bad that the wife, who I think was the second wife, told us—the funeral was the next day—said to take him to the cemetery and bury him, and let him know when it was done. She wasn't going to risk having—

SB: Bringing them all together!

DB: Bringing everyone back together. And we've since buried in that family again, and (laugh) (?) fights. "Whatever you do, don't put us back in that room." We said "Don't worry. There are still marks in the carpet from when someone was drug out of there."

JB: Then we buried this fellow, and after we buried him, a lady sued his son for fathering a child, and the son said, "It wasn't me that fathered the child, it was my daddy." And Daddy's out in Forest Hill Memorial Park. So his sisters and his mother, the wife of the deceased, who's still living, they had him taken up and did DNA to prove that he wasn't the father. So.

DB: But because of that, the blending of families and so many different pieces, it makes you wonder as you see more and more of that what the future will be like.

JB: Well, we just had the, here, two, three sisters, and they got into it here, and went outside, and one of them was chasing the other around the front yard with a hammer.

DB: You were pulled in the limousine one time, right?

JCB: Right.

DB: On the way to the church, by a deputy, to arrest a family member that they knew was in the car.

JCB: I said, "Couldn't it have waited until after the service?"

DB: We had a US marshal in Lexington who had a sting operation, or whatever you want to call it, had undercover people in the building to catch a guy who was on the run from Virginia, who was there, and they were going to take him at the cemetery, and he got into a different car than they expected when they were leaving. And they

converged—I mean, multiple vehicles boxed in the whole procession, and guns drawn. It was pretty dramatic.

SB: So they got him?

DB: They got him.

JB: Yeah, the marshal come to me before the service and said, "Would you give us permission to plant an individual in here? We've been tipped off that this fugitive is going to show up." And I said, "Is there any danger of hostage-taking?" And he said, "Oh, no, we won't do anything here. We just want to observe." Well, I'm standing out in the parking lot, everybody's in the car, two rows of car under the portico and I said to the policeman who's going to lead the procession, "We're ready." He said, "I can't go until my lieutenant gives me the order." And I'm standing out there wide open, and I said, "We need to go." He said, "I can't go." And about that time, these cars come screeching in, and they get this person out of the back seat of the car, and have him down on the pavement with his hands behind him in about the amount of time I just told this story.

[00:40:05] And a sister of his jumped out and started yelling at the marshal, and one of our guys said—it was a female marshal—she put her hand on her gun and said, "One more word out of you, and you'll go too." (Laughs)

DB: I remember years ago when I started in Lexington, we had a guy who was killed in a motorcycle accident—was in one of the big gangs—and I remember the SBI set up across the street photographing everybody coming in and out. Trying to—I don't know that they identified everybody, but. Said that they were updating their files.

SB: What is a motorcycle gang funeral like?

DB: I was young. I just remember, weren't there hundreds of bikes in the procession?

JB: Oh yeah. Yeah.

DB: That went to Stokesdale? Out of the county, in Stokesdale. Hundreds of motorcycles. We've had several of those services, and fairly traditional service.

JB: This one was—this guy must have been high-up in the hierarchy, because they came from everywhere. And they had all flowers with a black ribbon, "one-percenters." I don't know what that meant.

DB: When you serve the whole population, that's— (Laughs)

JB: I remember years ago we had a body out at a home, the family called up two o'clock in the morning and said, "The body is changing colors." Got up and went down there. The only thing, they'd dimmed the light a little or something. There wasn't any difference whatsoever. They'd set up all night, and maybe nipped a little bit as they set up.

JCB: (?)

SB: This is really wonderful, and I've taken a good hour and a half, almost two hours of y'all's day. But are there things that we haven't covered that you'd like to make sure are included in this?

JB: Well, I think when you talk about the history, the history of— Funeral homes provided ambulance service, and apparently this began as funeral homes acquired motorized equipment. And as a gesture of goodwill, to build goodwill in the community, they started providing transportation to the doctor's office, or if there was a hospital. And that's the way funeral homes got into it. And as I say, then in the '30s, '40s, and '50s, it became such a big part. And money, they lost money on it because they didn't charge anything, number one, and number two, they didn't collect, and number three, we were used as a taxi lots of times. You could always depend, when it started snowing, for somebody to bring their pregnant wife here to get the ambulance, because they were fearful that they couldn't make it to the hospital.

DB: You never delivered a baby.

JB: No, I was part of—I was driving one day when one was born in the back, about two miles out of Asheboro. And he hollered, "Step on it, there's another one on the way."

JCB: I think what was strange was, when you were born, in the '73 era, they wouldn't let fathers go in to the delivery room or labor room or anything. Even though he had about delivered babies in ambulances, and then all his training—not like now, but I thought that was such a contrast, that he could do it in the ambulance, but not in the hospital.

JB: And when our daughter was born in '79, I was in the delivery room, and I helped move her off the table because they were so busy.

SB: Well, I was born exactly between you and your sister, and I think my dad was allowed in the delivery room.

JCB: Must have been around '75?

SB: '76, yeah.

DB: And when my kids were born, he called—was that when Linda was born? When you said, "Do I need to come there?" Because we were really busy. And they had tried to induce labor on Friday, and it didn't take.

[00:45:00] This was our middle daughter. And we were really busy at work. And I showed up to work the weekend, and in fact one family that I was dealing with that I had known for a long time, they said, "We weren't expecting you to be here," and I said, "Well, it's a long story." But then we had several services on Monday. And she went into labor. He called, and said, "Do I need to come to the hospital?" And I said, "No, you need to go to Macedonia"[5] for the funeral. (Laughs)

JB: And we were pulling the casket across the grave when my phone started buzzing, and it was him telling me that she was here. Of the four, she's the only one that I wasn't in the hospital when she was born.

DB: And I don't know if they're going to want to go into the business. I don't know what the business will look like in another 20 years.

JCB: Yeah, that's a good point.

JB: We did this huge, 16,000-square-foot addition at Davidson in '95, '96—I mean '05 and '06—and in 10 years from now, with the changing customs, will we need that space? We need it now.

DB: Yeah.

JCB: Mm-hmm.

JB: But how it changes, and the increase in cremation and the decrease in people wanting—less than full service.

DB: Well, and it concerns me—I joke when I'm talking to different people, they say, "What are you concerned about?" I say, "I just want to remain relevant, because so many people we hear that say, "When I die, I don't want anything. I don't want"—you know. And I don't know that it's a cost issue as much as they don't see the need or the value in any type of service. And so I don't know where, I don't know where the profession's headed. But.

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[5] Presumably Macedonia United Methodist Church in Southmont, Davidson County, NC.

JB: And we have some of these discount cremation services in the surrounding counties, cremate bodies for half of what we can do it for, because, as Dan says, we're a bricks-and-mortar funeral home and we have set overhead, and we can't operate like somebody operates in a warehouse building.

DB: One person. But, I'm afraid what's driving that is that someone doesn't see the need. So that's the challenge to us, for people to see value in the funeral service. And I think the people that experience that understand it and, but how you communicate that, I don't—one of our challenges.

SB: I had that discussion with my aunt when my father died. 'Cause he was cremated, and his wishes were very strictly, "No service, nothing." And I remember my aunt being really just mad at him when she heard that, because she said, "The funeral's not for him, it's for us!"

DB: Well yeah, I was going to say, I've heard, some seminars I've been to, that the guy, who was pretty forceful about it, said, "When you die, you lose all your rights. It's not for you. It's for whoever's left." So I kid, I say I want to remain relevant; I don't want to be Blockbuster Video. (Laughs) My kids have no idea what that means.

SB: I wonder if, before we close, if I could ask you to tell again the story of the health crisis that you had? Because I think it's so—when people, you know, 200 years from now are listening to this recording, I think they'll want to know how lucky we were that you made it through and are here to talk about it.

JB: Oh. Well.

SB: If you're comfortable talking about it.

JB: Yeah, I am. I get emotional sometimes. My father died at age 36. I was three years old. He was being treated for deep vein thrombosis by doctors at Duke. They had sent him to Hot Springs, Arkansas, to bathe in those hot waters. And he apparently had a clot that moved, and he died.

[00:50:03] Three years old, I remember, I can remember an uncle holding me up to the casket. I can remember, I think, the night, the evening when he got nauseated, and he was going, vomiting on the front porch, across. So I have a background in my father's side of the family of heart conditions. My mother's side of the family, her oldest sister lacked three months of being 100. So. And I've tried to get a physical every year. Three or four years ago I said to the doctor during the physical, "Don't you think it would be wise if I did a stress test?" Hadn't done one in a long time. He agreed. Go to a cardiologist, did a stress test, didn't show any blockages. It did show that I had a slight dilation of the aorta. And every six months since then we've done a sonogram, see if it

had increased in size. So we were, had spent the night at our farmhouse out in the country, the home I grew up in, and that my mother moved back to after Daddy died. And I had—and I've printed out a copy, but there's a picture. That morning getting ready, I had just a mild sensation. Didn't last 60 seconds. Didn't think anything about it. It's nine miles out in the country, I drove on down here, and it was close to 10:00. I was setting at the computer sending an email, and I have no recall of any sensation whatsoever. But they say that I just fell out of the chair and hit my ear on the computer desk, and I was flat-line. And Candice and Brantly—Brantly started working here as a high school kid—he started CPR. Candce called 911. The Denton police chief responded, he's about three blocks away, and he must have been here within—the whole thing must have been not more than three or four minutes. And by that time he got in here, and popped the buttons on my shirt, and had the defibrillator, a first-responder was here and actually used the defibrillator. Shocked me one time, I started breathing. I vaguely recall asking—Joan was at the beauty shop down the street, and somebody came in and said, "What's happening at Rex Furniture?" She said, "I don't know." Said, "Well, there's all kinds of cars and EMS up there." So she called up here, and they said, "You better come up here." But by the time she got up here, they'd already shocked me, I was breathing. So she didn't see me flat-line, which is good. I recall—I'm not sure that you were here when I can recall saying, "What's going on, what's happened?" And they were trying to get me to lie down and be quiet. They apparently knocked me out, because I have no recall whatsoever on an ambulance trip to High Point, or the catheterization, until I came to after the catheterization. And when I came to and looked, Dan was standing at the door, and Larry Morrison, our partner at Davidson, was standing at the door, and Gary Overcash, our partner at Carter was standing at the door, and Scott Yates, our main man here, was standing at the door, looking at me. And Joan didn't like this when I quoted it in the paper. I said, "Who in the hell is looking after business if y'all are standing here looking at me?" And then they said, you know, stents are not an option, you've got to have—seven blockages. And so we made the decision next day to go to Baptist. The next day I was fine. I had no soreness, no residue or anything.

DB: He was up and moving around.

JCB: He was hungry and starving.

DB: He was on the phone all day, calling people, "Well, I had a little cardiac arrest yesterday."

JB: But then they did the surgery—this happened on a Wednesday, they did the surgery on Friday, and I remember waking, you know, coming to, and thinking, "Well, I'm alive."

[00:55:12] They did repair the aorta while they were in there. But then the next two or three days, everything went south. Like I said, couldn't regulate blood pressure, kidneys started failing, heartbeat, they couldn't regulate the heartbeat. And I think they told them it was 50-50. And I was basically like that for about four weeks. I recall very little of those four weeks. I do recall—and this is the one humorous thing—the nurses in there asking me, "Do you know who you are? Do you know where you are?" You know. "Do you know what day it is? Do you know the date?" And I said, "No." And they said, "Today's the 13th of January." Well, Joan's birthday's the 15th of January. She and Martin Luther have the same birthday. And Dan says, he said to me, "Pop, if today's the 13th, what's two days from today?" And I said, "The 15th." He said, "What's important about the 15th?" I said, "Estimated income taxes are due."

JCB: We all laughed at that.

JB: He said, "What else is important?" I said, "Oh, your mother's birthday." But I don't have a lot of recollections about that. I do remember this great big guy that was an aide or something, and he scared me to death because he was rough, and he looked like he could just squeeze you. Anyway, finally after four weeks they moved me out of critical care and upgraded me a little bit. And I was at Baptist a total of seven weeks, and then they moved me over to Forsyth Care.

JCB: Specialty Select.

JB: Specialty Select at Forsyth Hospital, for another three weeks. Well, by that time I could not walk. I had lost about 30—and I'm still way off, my suits are too big.

JCB: You are.

DB: You were on a ventilator.

JB: Yeah, I was on a ventilator.

DB: Four weeks or something.

JB: Catheter. I was on a feeding tube.

JCB: You were on dialysis.

JB: Yeah. They did dialysis. And after 10 weeks, they were ready to move me out, and I came to. We have a 120-bed, non-profit, owned by the community, nursing facility here in Denton, that I helped organize. And I came here for physical therapy, and I was there seven weeks. And I learned to walk. And that first day that I took that step was—I knew I could do it.

JCB: They tried to get you to slow down, and you just took off. Because he had one of those rolling walkers. He was just flying.

JB: So this mentioned it, and I made you a copy of that. (Gives Sarah a copy of news article about his health crisis.)

SB: Oh, thank you. Oh wow. That's a great photo too.

DB: So he's been very mobile, until he had the surgery four weeks ago.

JB: I've worked some services.

[Discussion of when JB had heart attack, agreeing that it was on January 6th.]

JB: But I'm so blessed to be here. Another 10 or 15 minutes, I would have been in my car heading to Lexington, and no one would have ever known what happened to me when I ran out of the road. And if I'd been at the homeplace with Joan—

JCB: It would have been longer to get help.

JB: Oh yeah. Yeah. Even if I'd been at Davidson. And that's something we've not—that boy is supposed to contact me about doing training.

DB: Yeah, something we all need, training in defibrillators.

SB: Do you have any recollection of the moment when it happened?

JB: No.

[01:00:00] The only thing I can vaguely recall is reaching up to answer the phone, and they say I dropped the phone, and the person on the other end of the line, I've been told, could hear all of the screaming and calling 911 and all of that, and had no idea what had happened.

DB: Yeah, we didn't know that for months.

JB: Right. Right. But I'm so fortunate. So fortunate to be here. Because Joan's just been to—well, Joan and Dan both, Dan worked the funeral—a guy who was director of Hospice of Davidson County for about 20 years, and Joan was on the hospice board, and he had apparently the same thing I had, and she said the EMTs were there in six minutes, but they couldn't bring him back. And so I was just so fortunate. And you

know, I've, if I can ever get this foot healed, I can live without toes—and fortunately I've got my mind. I don't think it's affected my memory a lot.

DB: No.

JCB: No.

DB: He's always been able to tell you who was buried where 50 years ago.

JCB: And the date, usually.

JB: Yeah, I had a fellow call the other day, I was starting to the doctor, and he gave me his name, he was wanting to come in, make funeral arrangements. And I said, "Yeah, I remember you. Your wife was buried at Pleasant Grove United Methodist Church. Is that right?" He said, "Yeah." And we looked it up, it was about 30 years ago. And he wasn't a native, so, but I remember the name.

JCB: Wasn't he from High Poiknt?

JB: Yeah. And had moved down here.

DB: How about the time you whipped the car around in Shallotte, North Carolina, and went in the pawn shop, and Mom didn't know what he was doing—

JB: We were coming back from—been to Wilmington to a meeting or something, and we have a condo at Garden City. We were on the way to Garden City. It wasn't Shallotte, it was below Shallotte, between Shallotte and Calabash, somewhere in there. And I passed this pawn shop, and this guy owed me for burying his mother, and the last I'd traced him to he was running a pawn shop somewhere around Little River or somewhere like that. And I wheeled around and pulled in the parking lot, and called the funeral home, said, "Give me the name of So-and-So So-and-So, we buried his mama." I couldn't think of his name. So I got out of the car, left Joan setting there in the car, and went in, it was dark in there, and this guy came from out the back curtain. I said, "I'm looking for So-and-So." He said, "That's me." I said, "Well, I'm Jack Briggs, and I buried your mother several years ago, and you never have paid me, and I came to collect." Of course I didn't get a (?). But I felt good, it made me feel good just to confront him. I said, "I know you'd feel a lot better if you'd pay your mama's funeral bill."

DB: I think of *Pulp Fiction* when he— Walking into a pawn shop.

JB: You can remember these people. We had this indigent at Lexington several years ago that was never, wasn't claimed, and two or three people would come by and say, "Oh, he's my uncle and I'm going to claim him." Well, nobody ever did. I was coming

home, and I thought, "That name sounds familiar." And I came home and I pulled out the old unpaid ambulance bills, and I had a $20 ambulance bill where I'd carried him to the hospital. What I didn't remember is that somebody else had carried him about ten minutes before I did, and had another. So he owed me $40. I called back up to Davidson and told (?), I said, "If anybody comes in and would happen to offer to pay for [deceased man's name redacted], add $40 to it."

DB: He waived the interest. (Laughs)

JB: Yeah, I waived the interest. But that's, the point I was making about funeral homes lost money on the ambulance, and it become such a demanding part of their time that that's the reason they all wanted to get out of it, and did get out of it.

[01:05:12] And of course now I look back at just the sheer liability of it.

SB: For staff as well as—

JB: Yeah, for staff. And you pick somebody up wrong, paralyze them, and—.

DB: You didn't ever do that, as far as you know, did you.

JB: As far as I know I didn't.

JCB: And back then you were gone for so long. You know, I said I could write a cookbook on how to keep food warm indefinitely, because this was before microwaves. Just as soon as I'd get dinner on the table he'd have to leave, and be gone for three hours. Because you took them in on the stretcher, and they stayed on the stretcher forever.

JB: Baptist Hospital in Winston would feed ambulance attendants free. You could go to the cafeteria as long as you had your jacket on, because they kept you up there so long. They just made a rule that you could eat free while you were up there.

DB: We should have put your jacket on you while you were there last year!

JB: That's right.

DB: And cc you.

JB: I've had a blessed life. Very blessed life. And still have a blessed life. And still have, I hope, a lot of good years ahead of us. Pleased that (?) has been such a help for Joan. She was involved from day one, as Dan alluded to, from the first night in our little

apartment, when they came and got me. But then her degree is in library science. She was a public school librarian. Not a media specialist.

JCB: They kept changing my title as time went on, and media grew. As books grew into media, I should say.

SB: So a different job title every few years.

JCB: Right.

JB: And of course one of the great disappointments in my life is the young man that started here like I did, who, he and I, Ms. Hoover sold the business to us. And we were great friends, and I have no brothers or sisters so he became like a brother. Developed lots of problems, problems with alcohol, problems in managing money, problems with the truth. I wound up settling, six years after we bought the business, buying half of his interest, which gave me 75, him 25, and then four years later buying the rest of his interest. And then he left here, and for about the last 20 years of his life worked for a firm in High Point. Excellent funeral director. Good embalmer. One of those people that could take an upset family and just have them eating out of his hand. But he just had the—I think he was bipolar, as I look back on it. And when I think about the opportunities that had been ours if he had remained true and doing what he's capable of doing, what we might have been able to do. So it's a tragedy. And he died. The firm he was working for terminated him just a few weeks before he died, and he died penniless. A tragedy. It was his own doing. But then after Joan got her license, and after we became, I became, more involved in Lexington, as long as she was here the public was fine. And then Dan is—

[Recording ends]